

"THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR."

ALL THE YEAR ROUND

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A VALIANT IGNORANCE.

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CHAPTER XIX

"GOOD-BYE! So glad to have seen you! What, dear Mrs. Ponsonby, are you going to run away too? So kind of you to come out on such an afternoon! Good-bye!"

It was a Friday afternoon, and Friday was Mrs. Romaine's "day." This particular Friday had been about as unpleasant, atmospherically, as it is possible for even a November day to be, short of actual dense fog; it had been very dark, and a drizzling rain—a dirty rain too—had fallen unceasingly. Under these circumstances it was rather surprising that any one should have ventured out, even in the most luxurious brougham, than that Mrs. Romaine's visitors should have been comparatively few in number.

The departure of the ladies to whom her farewells had been spoken, and with whom she had been exchanging social commonplaces for the last quarter of an hour, left her alone; and as she returned to her chair by the dainty tea-table and poured herself out a cup of tea, she had apparently very little expectation of further callers, though it was only just past five o'clock; for when the door-bell rang a few minutes later she paused, and a look of surprise crossed her face. She put down her cup with a little sigh, which was more a concession made to the dictum of conventionality that callers are a bore than an expression of real feeling; and then, as the door opened, she rose

with a touch of genuine satisfaction behind the superficial delight of her manner.

"My dear Mrs. Pomeroy!" she exclaimed. "How sweet of you to come out on such a shocking day! Really, you must have had an intuition of my forlorn condition, I think! Maud, dear, how are you?"

She had given her left hand to the girl in a familiar, caressing way as she retained Mrs. Pomeroy's right hand, and now she drew the elder lady with charming insistence towards a large, inviting-looking chair, indicating to the daughter with a pretty gesture that she was to take a low seat near the table.

"It is an ill wind that blows no one any good!" she continued gaily, as Mrs. Pomeroy greeted her placidly. "It is really too delightful to get you all to myself like this! How seldom one gets the chance of a cosy chat. And how very seldom it comes with the people of all others with whom one would thoroughly enjoy it! You'll have some tea, won't you—oh, yes, you really must; it is so much more friendly!" She laughed as she spoke, and turned to the girl sitting demurely on the low seat near her with a tacit claim on her sympathy and comprehension which was very fascinating. Miss Pomeroy's pretty, expressionless lips smiled sweetly, and her mother, who was always ready to yield to pressure where a cup of tea was concerned—that soothing beverage being forbidden her by her medical authorities—answered contentedly:

"Well, thanks, yes! I think I will! One really wants a cup of tea on a day like this, doesn't one?" Mrs. Pomeroy had rarely been known to leave a statement unqualified by a question. "It is really very disagreeable weather, isn't it?"

Not that it seems to trouble you at all.' Mrs. Pomeroy smiled one of her slow, amiable smiles as she spoke. "I am so glad to see you looking so much better!"

Mrs. Romaine laughed.

"I am very well indeed, thanks," she said. "But I've not been ill that I know of, dear Mrs. Pomeroy."

Mrs. Pomeroy shook her head gently.

"I thought, do you know, when I first came home, that you looked as though your holiday had been a little too much for you—so many people's holiday is a little too much for them, don't you think? And how is your boy? Very hard at work, we hear."

Mrs. Romaine smiled.

Mrs. Pomeroy was quite right in her comment on her looks, though such a case was rather unusual with her; and it was only within the last fortnight that they had altered for the better. Within that fortnight the brightness and vivacity which were always characteristic of her had ceased to be—as they had been for weeks before—wholly artificial; something of the look of nervous strain had gone out of her eyes, and her face was altogether less sharpened. Her smile now was genuine; and her voice, behind the mask of affectation which had become second nature to her in speaking of Julian, was strangely tender and contented.

"Very hard," she said. "I have had to get used to a great deal of absence on his part. He has gone down to Brighton to-day, until Monday; he needs a little fresh air, of course. It is so long since he has been shut up as he is now."

"You must miss him very much," said Mrs. Pomeroy placidly.

Mrs. Romaine did not answer directly, except with a laugh.

"I am almost inclined to envy mothers with daughters," she said, smiling at Miss Pomeroy again. "I wonder, now"—a sudden idea had apparently struck Mrs. Romaine—"I wonder whether you would lend me your daughter now and then, and I wonder whether she would consent to be lent."

"I should be delighted," said Mrs. Pomeroy, with vague amiability, and an equally vague glance at her daughter. "And I'm sure Maud will be delighted, too; won't you, Maud?"

"Delighted!" assented Maud, with pretty promptitude.

"Well, then, we must arrange it some-

time or other," declared Mrs. Romaine gaily. "Perhaps you would come and spend a week with me, Maud—that would be charming!"

But she did not press the point, letting the subject drop with apparent carelessness, and talking brightly about other things, always keeping the girl in the conversation; turning to her now and then with a pleasant, familiar word, or a gesture which was lightly affectionate. The mother and daughter had risen to take leave when she said carelessly:

"Oh, by-the-bye, Maud, dear, have you anything to do to-morrow afternoon? I've been bothered into taking two tickets for a matinée, a charity affair, you know, but they say it will be rather good. It would be so nice of you to come with me!"

"It will be very nice of you to take me!" was the response. "Thank you very much!"

A minute or two more passed in the arrangement of the place and hour for meeting, and then Mrs. Pomeroy drifted blandly out of the room, followed by her daughter, and Mrs. Romaine was again alone.

She walked to the fireplace this time, and putting one foot on the fender, stood looking down, her face intent and satisfied.

"Just the right sort of girl!" she said to herself. "Just the right sort of girl!"

She was wearing the little gold bangle which Julian had given her on her birthday—the one which Miss Pomeroy had helped him to choose—and she was turning it on her wrist with tender, contemplative touches. She was so absorbed in her reflection that she did not hear the servant come into the room, or notice for the moment that the girl was standing beside her with a letter. She started at last, and looked up; took the letter, and opened it carelessly, without looking at it, as the woman took away the tea-table.

"DEAR COUSIN HERMIA,—Unless I hear from you to the contrary, I propose to call on you to-morrow (Saturday), at three o'clock, on a matter of grave importance.—Faithfully yours, DENNIS FALCONER."

Mrs. Romaine's face had changed slightly as she began to read—changed and hardened—and as she finished she drew the letter through her fingers with a gesture of mere impatience, which was somehow belied by the look in her eyes.

Something of that strained look had come back into them. She could not see him to-morrow, she was saying to herself briefly; she was not going to put off Maud Pomeroy; Dennis Falconer must fix another time, and she would write him a line at once. She walked quickly across to her writing table, sat down, drew out a sheet of paper and took up a pen.

And then she paused.

Ten minutes later her note was written, and on its way to the post, but it was not directed to Dennis Falconer. It began, "My dear Maud," and it told Miss Pomeroy that business had "turned up" which would make it impossible for Mrs. Romayne to go to the theatre on the following afternoon, and that she enclosed the tickets hoping that Maud might be able to use them.

Exactly on the stroke of three on the following afternoon the door-bell rang. Mrs. Romayne was alone in the drawing-room, apparently lazily and pleasantly enough occupied with the latest number of the latest society paper; and as the sound reached her ear her lips hardened into a thin, straight line, and her eyes flashed for a moment with a look of antagonism which was almost defiant. Then the servant announced:

"Mr. Falconer!"

Dennis Falconer was looking very pale; there was little colour even in his lips, and his face was set and stern. He took the hand Mrs. Romayne held out to him, and replied to her greeting in the briefest possible phrase, with no softening of a something curiously solemn and inexorable about his demeanour, though his eyes rested on her for an instant with a singular expression. He disliked and despised the woman before him, and yet at that moment he pitied her.

"Sit down!" she said. "I am charmed to see you, though, do you know, you have chosen an inopportune moment. I had a very pleasant engagement for this afternoon, and I nearly put you off. So I hope the business is really very grave."

Her voice was lightness itself, and that very lightness, with the almost unusual loquacity with which she had received him, seemed to witness to the presence in her mind of a recollection which she was determined to ignore—the recollection of their last interview in that very room. There was a curious air about her of having entrenched herself behind a barrier of artificiality which she tacitly defied him

to pass; of being resolute this time against surprise or against any other method of attack.

"It is very grave!" said Falconer, and in contrast with her voice, his rang with stern heaviness. "I must ask you to prepare yourself for bad news!"

"Bad news!" she echoed sharply, as her eyes, fixed on his face, grew suddenly bright and keen. "Oh—money, I suppose?" Her voice jarred a little, though she spoke very lightly.

"No!" said Falconer.

His tone was absolutely uncompromising. On his unsympathetic and unimaginative mind the effect of her manner was to obliterate his sense of pity beneath a consciousness of the retributive justice of the moment before her.

"Not money?" she said, with a little, unreal laugh. "Well, that's a comfort, at any rate." Her hand had clenched itself suddenly round the arm of her chair on his monosyllable, and now she paused a moment, almost as though her breath had failed her, before she said, with affected carelessness: "And if not—what?"

Her back was towards the light, and Falconer could not see her face.

"I will answer your question, if you will allow me, with another," he said. "Have you noticed anything unusual in the course of the past month—or more—in the conduct of your son?"

In the instant's dead silence that followed a slight creaking sound made itself audible and then died away. The clenched hand on the bar of Mrs. Romayne's chair had passed slowly round it with such intense pressure as to produce the sound. Then she answered him, as he had previously answered her, in a monosyllable.

"No!" she said. There was a desperate effort in her voice at carelessness, at nonchalance, at astonishment; but it was penetrated through and through with all her past antagonism towards and defiance of the man before her accentuated into fierce repudiation. Falconer's voice, as he answered her, seemed to confront that defiance with inexorable fate.

"That is almost unfortunate," he said sternly. "In that case, I fear that what I have to tell you must fall with double and treble severity, as coming upon you unawares. Will you not think again? Has he not been absent from home a good deal? Have his absences been satisfactorily accounted for? Have you ever proved"—he paused, laying stress upon

the last word—"have you ever proved such accounts as given by himself correct?"

With a valiant effort, the power of which Falconer must have appreciated had he been able to penetrate beyond the ghastly artificiality of the result, Mrs. Romayne rallied her forces, and strove to throw his words back upon him; to defend and entrench herself once and for all with the only weapon she knew. She broke into a thin, tuneless laugh.

"What an absolutely gruesome catechism!" she cried. "Really, it would take me weeks of solitary confinement and meditation among the tombs—Isn't there a book about that, by-the-bye?—before I could approach it in a duly sepulchral spirit. Do you know, it would be an absolute relief to me if you could come to the point? I am taking it for granted, you see, that there is a point, which is no doubt a compliment which its infinitesimal nature hardly deserves. Produce the poor little thing, for heaven's sake!"

"The point is this," said Falconer, grimly and concisely. "Your son's life, as you know it, is a lie. He has a sordid version of what is known as an 'establishment.' He is living with a work-girl in Camden Town."

There was a choked, strangled sound, and Mrs. Romayne's figure seemed to shrink together as though every muscle had contracted in one simultaneous throb. Her face, could Falconer have seen it, was rigid and blank, except for her eyes. For that first instant she looked as a patient might look who, having suspected himself of a deadly disease, having congratulated himself on the subsidence of his symptoms and known hope, learns from his physician that that subsidence of obvious symptoms was in itself only a more dangerous symptom still, and that he is indeed doomed. Her eyes were the eyes of a woman who looks despair full in the face.

But with no human being who keeps hold of life and reason can the vivid agony of such a vision endure for more than an instant. It dulls by reason of its very insupportableness. Time is an empty word where mental suffering is concerned, and the second-hand of the tall clock in the corner had traversed its dial only once before a kind of film passed over those agonised eyes, and Mrs. Romayne spoke in a thin, hoarse voice. And the man so close to her was conscious of nothing but a short pause, and was revolted accordingly.

"How do you know?" Even in that moment the instinct of defiance of him personally could not wholly yield, and lingered in her voice.

"I have an old servant who lives in Camden Town. He is an invalid, and I occasionally visit him. His wife is a garrulous woman, and thinking that I have some claim on her gratitude, considers it necessary to inform me as to all her own and her neighbours' affairs. Visiting the husband last Friday week, I found the wife greatly excited and alarmed for the reputation of the street—in which she lets lodgings—by the appearance in the house opposite of a couple whose relations to one another had instantly been suspected by their landlady and her neighbours, though they passed as newly-made man and wife!"

With a sudden low cry of inexpressible horror and dismay Mrs. Romayne sprang to her feet, flinging out her hands as though to keep off something intolerable to be borne.

"No! no!" she cried breathlessly. "No! no! Not that! Not married! It would be ruin! Ruin! ruin! No! no!"

Dennis Falconer paused, freezing slowly into what seemed to him surely justifiable abhorrence of the woman before him. What if he knew in his heart that such a marriage would indeed mean ruin to a young man? So bald a trampling down of the moral aspect of the position before the practical was not decent! It was for a woman—and that woman the young man's mother—to be overwhelmed by the moral horror to the exclusion of every other thought! And it was the practical alone that had drawn any show of emotion from Mrs. Romayne!

"I am sorry to have agitated you!" he said, and his voice was cold and cutting as steel. "I have no doubt in my own mind that they are not married. I had better perhaps continue to give you the facts in order. Chance led to my seeing the young man in question as he was leaving the house. I recognised your son. I proceeded to make inquiries. He passes as a medical student, under the name of Roden. The girl is—or was—a hand at one of the big millinery establishments. From her affectation of innocence and simplicity, the woman who has most opportunity of observing her is inclined to think the very worst of her!"

A quick, hissing breath—an unmistakable breath of relief—parted Mrs.

Romayne's white lips. She had sunk down again in her chair and was grasping it now with both hands as she leant a little forward, trembling in every limb.

"Then it is not likely—it is not likely that he has married her," she said, in a low, rapid tone to herself rather than to Falconer, as it seemed. "Go on!"

"There is very little more to be said," returned Falconer, icily. "They have occupied the rooms—that is to say, the girl has occupied them, visited every day by your son—for three weeks now. The woman has discovered that they had been somewhere in the country together for a week previously. You will, of course, be able to recall his absence from home. Yesterday he took her away into the country again; they are to return on Monday!"

He stopped; and as though she were no longer conscious of his presence Mrs. Romayne's head was bowed slowly lower, as if under some irresistible weight, until her forehead rested on her hand, stretched out still upon the arm of her wide chair. She was thinking of yesterday; of Julian's farewell to her; of the tenderness and gaiety he had shown during the last three weeks, which had almost lulled her back again into a false security. And it had all been a lie!

She lifted her face at last, white and haggard as twenty added years of life should not have made it, and rose, helping herself feebly with the arm of her chair, like a woman whose physical strength is broken. Falconer rose also. He was utterly alienated from her; he was conscious of only the most distant pity, but he felt that it was incumbent on him to say something.

"I regret very much that it should have fallen to my lot to break this to you!" he said, stiffly and awkwardly. "I fear that coming from me——" He hesitated and paused.

From out the past, confusing, almost numbing him, a vague and ghastly influence had risen suddenly upon him to strain that strange, intangible, and awful cord of common knowledge by which he and the woman before him were bound together, revolt against it or deny its presence as they might. Under the touch of that influence his last words had come from him almost involuntarily. He had not known whither they tended; he could bring them to no conclusion.

Mrs. Romayne looked him in the eyes,

holding now to a table by which she stood, but with no weakness in her ashen face. She seemed to be concentrating all her force into one final repudiation and defiance of him. She ignored his words as though he had not spoken.

"I will ask you to leave me now!" she said. And her voice, thin and toneless though it was, left her completely mistress of the situation.

She made no movement to shake hands; he hesitated a moment, then bowed and left the room.

AFTER THE BOAT-RACE.

WHEN the little launch with the white flag at the peak labelled "Judge" steams up and takes its moorings, the moving crowd on the tow-path thickens up and becomes a solid mass of spectators. There are still steamers fussing about, loaded with people from up and down the river, on the look-out for a good berth, and finding none; nervous oarsmen are pulling from side to side, rejected by all and sundry to whom they proffer attachment; the last barge of a long string comes drifting through the serried ranks of the craft that line the shore on either side.

It is very well on the tow-path here, just opposite the flagstaff that marks the end of the race, for the ground slopes after the fashion of an amphitheatre, and a fair sight is obtained of the last section of the course, with the malhouses and homely ivied church tower of Mortlake, a filmy horizon of trees, and the river coming cranking in, a little rough and lumpy with a stiff breeze, that is decidedly from the east. Yet the afternoon is fair and sunny, and the wind, though keen, is not rasping, and everything looks bright and cheerful. A balloon that rises at this moment has the appearance of an ivory ball suspended in the skies, and such slight haze as hangs about takes a roseate hue from the declining sun.

The most conspicuous object now is the flagstaff on the other side, and the high river-bank, which rises against the sky-line fringed with human figures, and ornamented by a steam crane which has now seen a good many boat-races, and which promises to be as constant a feature as the once-famous crane on the then unfinished tower of Cologne Cathedral. As to what that big embankment means over there, which

the crane is helping to pile up, opinions on the river-bank are much divided. Some say the site is for a huge factory in the line of soap and candles; others hint at a river terrace with "mansions" eighteen storeys high, which will at all events afford a capital view of the boat-races of the next century. A veteran barges, who has lost sight of his ship in the crowd, remembers the place as "Barker's rails," and there might have been discerned a white railing there, and a solitary figure, perhaps Barker himself, sitting thereupon, and keeping a vigilant look-out for trespassers, in the long ago of 1845 when the University race was first rowed over the course.

It is still a solitary spot, this peninsula of Chiswick, for every day but one in all the year round. Still wild birds haunt its creeks, and plashy osier-beds and reedy margins, for it will be remembered that from the ferry near Chiswick Church to Kew Bridge, a distance of three miles, there are no regular means of crossing, and for the greater part of the distance no public roads or footpaths leading to the river. This seclusion was long preserved by the existence of extensive private grounds, which spread across the peninsula. There was Sutton Court, once tenanted by Cromwell's daughter, Lady Faulconberg; and Grove Park, of which a benevolent if eccentric proprietor once bequeathed a life interest to his horses, dogs, and old servants; and with these the better known Chiswick House, built by Pope's Lord Burlington, and long possessed by the Dukes of Devonshire, but now occupied as an asylum. The two former estates are being rapidly covered by buildings; but Chiswick House, overlooking its pleasant meadows by the river, is still intact. One cannot help thinking what a fine riverside public park the block of land would make, with a frontage from Corney Lane to the Barnes Railway Bridge, and accessible by river steamers at all times of the tide.

But while we are speculating as to the past and future of the opposite coast, there begins a sympathetic movement in the crowd, which has by some intuitive means divined the fact that "they're off," and eyes are now strained to the full to catch the first glimpse of the racing crews. But the last few minutes have somewhat impaired the prospect from the bank. The tide has risen some inches, and with the tide the crowded barges moored along the banks, and with the barges the people on

board of them, who seem to lengthen out beyond all due proportion. "Don't they stretch their necks, them gals!" says a disappointed spectator of less than the average stature, and the river course glitters through a doubtful haze of hats, mostly feminine, and a vague if pleasing flutter of ribbons, wraps, and dishevelled locks. Stentorian cries of "Sit down in front" are scarcely meant seriously, and are certainly disregarded; in fact, people seem to grow taller and taller, and necks are further and further stretched as the gathering roar announces the approach of the crews. That roar is the most exciting part of the proceedings. It rolls with gruff reverberations from shore to shore, a shore of which the sands are human beings, all vocal for the moment, and so runs up from bank to bank, led by the hooting of the steamers, till it culminates in one great crash of voices, amidst which a boat with dark-blue oars shoots forward well to the front, and as a pistol-shot is heard, the clamour suddenly abates, and dies away in hollow murmurings.

Now that the attractive force which drew together this vast crowd, of which we are only on the outskirts, is loosened, the process of dispersion begins. What a flight of boats, of steamers, of launches, electric and otherwise, of canoes, of randans, gigs, wherries, and of every description of craft, is whirling upwards with the tide! Bluff tugs with trails of barges laden with sight-seers push their way through the throng. Where the river is narrowed by an islet opposite Strand-on-the-Green, the wash from the bigger craft raises a commotion which is really dangerous for small boats. But here is Robinson Crusoe in his little dingey almost as broad as it is long, which is whirled about like a cork in the flood, but he moves on all the same, no matter which end of the boat is foremost. Then there are saloon steamers such as summer brings with music, dance, and song, to Richmond or Hampton Court, but to-day chartered by dwellers in Richmond, Kingston, or even from distant Reading. All the up-river people seem to have descended bodily to see the boat-race, and now are in full retreat, and there is no end to the flotilla that dances joyously on the waves itself has raised.

But on the shore public attention is directed to quite other things. This is the opening day of the cunning man. The first warm day brings him forth with all his

tribe. It was the same two hundred years ago, when a poet describes their exodus

All these on hoof now trudge from town
To cheat poor turnip-eating clown,

although there was then no such glorious harvest as is offered to the crew by a fine boat-race day.

As to the race itself, it is almost forgotten by now. No one seems to care. But it is instructive to note that there is no trace left of that sturdiness of opinion which stands to its colours whether they win or lose. One little maid, indeed, is heard to say: "Oh, I'm so very sorry for Cambridge," but all who have worn the light-blue favours have now cast them aside, and those who have committed themselves to such colours in essential articles of apparel seem to be rather ashamed of themselves, and are the subject of jeering remark from the bystanders.

But it is not light or dark blue that is now in question among that closely packed circle of excited bystanders, but the more ominous colours of rouge or noir. Or rather it is that grotesque substitute for a roulette-table, which consists of a funny old gentleman with a spiral staircase for spinal marrow, and a marble to roll down it, and hop about among a number of cavities in the board beneath.

"Here y'are, gents, back your number or your colour; make your game while the ball's a-rolling." The old familiar cry is still to the fore, and if the machinery is no longer so elaborate as of old, when peripatetic gambling-tables were often of a costly character, that is because the police are pretty sure to capture and confiscate anything of a bulky character. But the passion for gambling only seems to increase under the difficulties thrown in its way. Next to the roulette-table a game with dice is going on. On a strip of American cloth stretched on a deal box is painted in clumsy white letters, "Under—over—seven." This, with a dice-box and two dice, constitutes the whole machinery. If a "copper" is signalled as approaching, it is the work of a moment to pocket the cloth and dice-box, and the packing-case may be abandoned without great loss. Of course the game is considerably against the punter, as only double stakes are paid for the seven, the odds against which throw are six to one; and for throws under and over seven, single stakes, the odds in each case being four to three against the thrower. Still, the pull in favour of the

bank seems hardly strong enough to find two or three brawny ruffians in board and lodging, and it is difficult to see where the cheating comes in. A much simpler and more profitable way of "roping in" is afforded by the revolving hand, which has such a convenient way of stopping where the stakes happen to be smallest. But this way of all others of losing money is the easiest to be understood of the people, and the most popular among them. There is a constant crush to get near the revolving index, and a stream of coppers falls in a perpetual cascade upon the table.

It is a roadside Monte Carlo, this broad tow-path between Mortlake and Kew, and one can only wonder at the instinctive sagacity that has brought these cunning rascals to the only spot where they could make a harvest. Elsewhere the crowd is too thick and not of the right sort, but here there is a suburban, if not country element about the throng passing along which is soon enthralled into this furtive gambling: there is the railway porter fingering the coins in the pocket of his velveteens, and much disposed to venture at the wheel of fortune; a red jacket or two is among the crowd, and a strong contingent of larrikins and boys, and the copper coins rattle down in a still-increasing shower. The three-card trick performers also are in force, and losing money freely in sums of five and ten shillings in a manner most enticing.

As a natural consequence of the engrossing pursuit, all other caterers for the general amusement are neglected. The cocoa-shy speculator, who is often an honest, hard-working fellow in his line, finds his appeals for patronage utterly ignored; the banjo-man has blackened his face in vain, there is no audience for him, and his hat is returned to him empty. Music and all the ingenuous arts are neglected, while crowds surround the gambling stands. Even the little sweetheart is neglected while Lubin empties his pockets into the wheel of fortune.

But we are soon past the haunt of the artful ones, and Kew Bridge comes in sight with its high, comely arches, and the wooded eyot beyond, over which now hangs the sun like a red-hot ball in the hazy sky. In a nook on the Middlesex side of the bridge a clever little conjurer has got together a capital audience. There should be a future for open-air conjuring, judging by the success of this professor,

who pleases his audience with his patter, and does neat little tricks with very small apparatus. Yet he gets live pigeons and guinea-pigs out of a borrowed hat, and extracts a brimming tumbler from the head of a small, bright-looking urchin, "a puffet stranger," who brings down the house by his looks of horror and surprise. But the conjurer's ingenuity was even better displayed in the adroitness with which he introduced opportunities for making a collection. Now it was that he had made a solemn promise to his preceptor in the black art never to perform a certain trick without fourteenpence halfpenny in hand. Not a penny above that sum would he take; but the solemn pledge he had given compelled him to suspend the performance till that exact sum was subscribed. A working-class audience, always liberal with coppers, freely responds, and the performance goes on. It has been going on all day, and the professor is getting hoarse and husky. He has got as much as he wants for himself, but he must have another collection for that nice little boy who had the pluck and spirit to come forward to have his head cut open. Again the British workman, always touched with disinterested benevolence, liberally responds.

Away go the streams of people, carts and carriages, four-horse vans and four-horse coaches; trains are crammed, trams are carried by storm, everybody seems hurrying away, and yet how many remain!

Hammermith on boat-race night is like a fair, its taverns, its music-halls crowded till closing time, and the very latest train that goes will be packed as tight as it will hold. And all those Noah's arks full of people, who have steamed up the river, are making out their holiday, doubtless, with some kind of amusement "all along the river, oh!"

But when the lights of Hammermith, with its glowing shops and flaring stalls, and the cries of the vendors, and the shouts of the crowd, are left behind, the way is quiet enough towards Chiswick, where there is no merrymaking going on. And here, in the dim lamplight, we see the necromancer gliding along towards town, covered with the March dust but content, the pigeons perched on his little pack, the guinea-pigs peeping out of a pocket, and trotting along by his side the clever little boy, the subject of the conjurer's experiments, who bids fair to be as clever a performer as his father.

EPITHETS.

I HAVE no intention of discussing here those epithets, not always complimentary, which honourable members, in a certain distinguished chamber, are accustomed to apply to other honourable members; nor do I propose to enter upon the general subject of Epithets, and the part they have played in the history of the world. Though such an enquiry would undoubtedly prove interesting, not a few wars, negotiations, revolutions, political imbroglíos, and the like, being traceable to "a nice derangement of epitaphs;" and in our own country, even at the present day, the complexion of a man's political views depending very much upon the epithet he picks up and labels them with—Whiggish, Radical, Liberal Unionist, Tory Democrat, as the case may be. My purpose, however, is simply to touch upon that judicious use of Epithets in Poetry which is so essential to its grace and impressiveness. To put the right word in the right place is, to be sure, the distinction of a great master of style, whether in poetry or prose; but in poetry there is more room and more need for finish of detail than in prose, and the choice of a happy epithet tells with greater effect, just as the finest carving shows to more advantage on a cameo of ivory than on a column or architrave of marble. One turns to a prose writer, primarily, for what he has to say; to a poet, in no small measure, for the way in which he says it. In a lyric or a sonnet one's attention, I think, is given, in the first place, to the perfection of the form; the fulness of the music; and, in the second, to its inner meaning, its esoteric significance, the burden of the message which it is intended to convey. I venture to affirm that most people read "Paradise Lost" for the grandeur of its language and the wealth of its imagery—caring very little, or not at all, for the theological themes which it embraces. In Shelley's "Skylark" one can hardly contend that the thought is very original or very important; it is the sweet, subtle melody of the rapturous song that makes it immortal. The selection of apt and expressive epithets which will give colour to his verse is incumbent, therefore, upon the poet who would not only be a poet but an artist.

The world's early singers did not go very far, it is true, in this direction. They painted with a bold brush on a large

canvas; and men, who then had ample leisure, were well content that they should tell their story in vivid outlines, and with liberal contrasts of light and shade. Thus you will find that Homer seldom introduces an epithet as a mere grace or embellishment. He has, it is true, an ample stock of adjectives and compound words—"cloud-compelling Zeus," "rosy-fingered Dawn," and so on; but these are limited to purposes of utility. Like the "leit-motif" of the Wagnerian opera, they serve to particularise certain characters, and are repeated whenever those characters are brought forward, just as a flourish of trumpets on the stage always precedes the entry of king or hero. In Virgil, on the other hand, the epithet seems to occupy a place of vantage. It is the sign and seal of the poet's exquisite feeling; and to my mind few poets have excelled him in the skill and good fortune with which he always plays, as it were, the right word. A similar aptitude of expression delights us in Horace, whose odes sparkle freely with gem-like examples of felicitous epithets felicitously applied; like those minute touches, those half-tones, with which a great painter completes the harmony and effectiveness of his picture. In Chaucer, with whom our English poetry begins, you detect quite a Homeric simplicity of epithet: the meads are "green," the sun is "bright," the may is "sweet;" no attempt is made to define the object named; the poet jots down a vaguely general term and passes on. This manner of his was justified by the fact that the reader did not then demand, nor would he have understood, the exactness of language and delicacy of analysis which we now look for, and will not dispense with. The fairy land of Poetry was then all new and fresh; and the pilgrim, enchanted by the fair, sweet aspects of the region into which he had been admitted, cared not to tarry for the purpose of differentiating each separate feature. So Chaucer, in his manly, genial way, blithely sings how

The sonne shon
Upon my bed with bryghte bemys,
With many gladde, golde stremys,

and again, "Blue, bryghte, clere was the air." What can be simpler—or less percipient; plainer—or less reflective? Glad, golden, bright, clear! Adjectives which belong to the versifier's stock-in-trade—and yet how appropriate and agreeable in Chaucer's straightforward narratives.

But the generations pass, and the Muse is seen to array herself with gold, and silver, and precious stones. The poet is no longer satisfied merely to tell his tale or enforce his moral; he studies the happiness of expression, the force and fitness of words; he is painstaking in the appropriation of his epithets, so that each shall convey its exact shade of meaning, and answer its artistic purpose. Our English minstrels, I think, owed something, after all, to the influence of the Euphuists, who, whatever may have been their faults of exaggeration and extravagance, had at least a pious care for verbal jewellery and delicacies of style. When Spenser sings of the trees, therefore, he does something more than describe them as "green" or "leafy," epithets which apply to any and every tree, but impresses upon each its distinct character, as "the warlike beech," "the myrrh sweet-blending," and "the fruitful olive." Spenser, I need hardly say, abounds in music and in colour; the right tone, the true note, are always forthcoming. "The flaming mouths of steeds," for instance—what a fine and forcible phrase! But such phrases are common enough in the poet's "The Faery Queen."

Epithet-making is not the business of the dramatic poet; but Shakespeare excelled in this, as in everything. It is by Milton, however, that the art is first practised with deliberate intention, and in Milton I think we may say that it reaches perfection. His wide learning, his rich fancy, and his refined taste helped him to a thorough mastery of his craft; so that the just employment and happy collocation of words have been practised by no English writer with greater success. Hence it is that so many of his phrases have been taken up into our common currency; as "storied windows," "a dim religious light," "the studious cloisters pale," "day's garish eye," "gorgeous Tragedy in sceptred pall," "most musical, most melancholy," all of which occur in the one short poem of "Il Penseroso." From its companion, the "Allegro," you can easily cull as many: "linked sweetness," "antique pageantry," "busy hum of men," "chequered shade," "towered cities," "light fantastic toe," "wreathed smiles." Upon no one of these would it be possible to improve. The same felicitousness is observable in his great epic. Then there in that noble line in "Lycidas," "The great vision of the guarded mount," while in

"Paradise Lost" every page presents some striking example, as: "the frozen lions of the populous North," "autumnal leaves," "that opprobrious hill," "their airy purposes," "sonorous metal blowing martial sounds," "orient colours waving," "thronging helms and serried shields," "disastrous twilight," and "vision beatific."

The strong rhetorical verse of Dryden almost ignores the luxuries of ornament, whereas Pope employs them liberally to conceal the quality of the metal with which he works. His epithets are generally artificial, often conventional, except, indeed, when he wants to point a satiric line. Take his celebrated paraphrase of the description of moonlight in the "Iliad." We read about "clear azure," "sacred light," "vivid planets," and "dusky horrors"; but the insincerity of these terms disgusts us. They are evidently manufactured, and have no true relation to the scene they are supposed to help in representing. The same conventionalism characterises the poet's phraseology in the "Essay on Man": "nectareous juice" and "balmy dew," "whispering zephyr" and "purling rill"; these belong to the "Gradus ad Parnassum" of Della Cruscan rhymesters. I remember, however, one singularly successful epithet which occurs in this poem: "Die of a rose in aromatic pain." Collins, one of the truest of our minor poets, often exhibits a pleasing dexterity of touch in the colouring which, by happily chosen words, he communicates to his verse; as in his beautiful "Ode on the Highland Superstitions," where the right word is always forthcoming without any noticeable effort, and by the simplest yet most effective means the poet produces the impression he desires. Take as a proof one lovely stanza:

There each trim lass that skims the milky store
To the swart tribes their creamy bowl allots;
By night they sip it round the cottage door,
While airy minstrels warble jocund notes.

"The poetic language of our eighteenth century in general," says Matthew Arnold, "is the language of men composing without their eye on the object, as Wordsworth excellently says of Dryden; language merely recalling the object, as the common language of prose does, and then dressing it out with a certain smartness and brilliancy for the fancy and understanding. This is called 'splendid diction.' It is upon this so-called splendour of diction that Gray's

claim to a place among our poets mainly rests, and no doubt his extensive culture and scholarly taste often assist him to a really striking image, and much polish of versification. But, alas! as in Pope's case, we feel its insincerity, its want of truth; and even in his picturesque poem of the "Elegy" the smell of the midnight oil prevails over the fresh breath of the churchyard mould. "The breezy call of incense-breathing morn" is pretty, but what does it mean?

How jocund did they drive the team afield!

How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

It is evident that these smooth-sounding lines were never written from actual observation. In the "Hymn to Adversity" the unreal is again imposed upon us—"iron scourge," "adamantine chain," "torturing hour"—anybody can look these up in a dictionary! Turn to Cowper or Burns, and we at once detect the immense difference between the false and forced note, and the note spontaneous and true.

I am not attempting a general survey of English poetry, and I pass on, therefore, to Wordsworth. "Splendid diction" he commands with the wealth of a Croesus whenever his subject needs it—where in all our poetical literature shall we find anything more gloriously splendid than the ode on the "Intimations of Immortality"?—but then it is wholly spontaneous and natural. It rises out of the subject, and is in entire accord with it—seeks the poet rather than is sought by him. In like manner his epithets frequently charm us by their "curiosa felicitas"; though this is never his aim, but simply to present to his own mind the clearest conception possible of the object before him. In his noble poem on "Yew Trees," how finely descriptive and admirably appropriate is each epithet:

A growth
Of intertwined fibres serpentine,
Upcoiling, and inveterately convolved.

And in the sonnet on the Beach at Calais, beginning:

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free.

It would, of course, be easy to pick out gems of expression from Coleridge; and as for Shelley, his verse is loaded with gorgeous embroidery, like the robe of a Persian king. You know his glowing forest-landscape in "Alastor"? "The meeting boughs and implicated leaves," "the night's noontide dreamers," "a soul-dissolving odour," "like vaporous shapes

half-seen." And the "Ode to a Skylark," the "Prometheus," the "Adonais"—it is a delightful study to examine the exquisite appropriateness and happy originality of the terms employed by the poet in description and characterisation. I take the first illustrations that occur to me :

In the golden lightning
Of the sunken sun,
O'er which clouds are bright'ning,
Thou dost float and run,
Like an embodied joy whose race is just begun.
Sound of vernal showers
On the twinkling grass,
Rain-awakened flowers,
All that ever was
Joyous and clear and fresh, thy music doth surpass.
And it unfurled its heaven-coloured pinions ;
With stars of fire spotting the streams below,
And from above into the Sun's dominions
Flinging a glory like the golden glow
In which Spring clothes her emerald-winged
minions,
All interwoven with fine feathery snow,
And moonlight splendour of intensest rime
With which frost paints the pines in winter
time.

As underneath a cloud of dew,
Embodied in the windless heaven of June,
Amid the splendour-winged stars, the moon
Beams inextinguishably beautiful.

As for Keats, he almost oppresses us with his Tarpeian burthen of costly ornament : "Trees young and old, sprouting a shady boon ;" "The earnest trumpet spake ;" "The shady sadness of a vale ;" "The healthy breath of morn ;" "A diver in the pearly seas ;" "The popped warmth of sleep ;" "Smooth-sculptured stone ;" "A throbbing star seen 'mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose ;" "Singest of summer in full-throated ease ;" "Verdurous glooms and mossy winding ways ;" "Looked at each other with a wild surmise." It is with such exquisitely chosen and richly coloured phrase—rounded and lucent as a pearl—that Keats holds captive our admiration.

Among the later poets—passing over with regret Browning, Swinburne, Morris, and other singers of our own time for want of space—I should point to Matthew Arnold and Tennyson as excelling in the art of making and applying epithets. In Arnold's poems, which with their modern tone combine the old classic form, we constantly come upon the happiest instances, their fitness as well as their beauty fixing them permanently in our memory. As thus : "Pale, dew-drenched, half-shut roses gleam ;" "The brook shines . . . in its clear, shallow, half-fringed bed ;" "All the woody, high, well-watered dells ;" "Lonely, cold-shining lights, unwilling lingerers in the heavenly wilderness ;" "The moon-

silvered inlets ;" "The sweet-breathing presence ;" "The sun-reddened western straits," and "Labour-dimmed eyes." In pure grace and fine polish of expression Arnold is scarcely outvied by Tennyson himself, though he, of all our poets, the most excels in those verbal felicities which linger in the ear like echoes of sweet music ; and more particularly in epithets curiously exact and fortunate in their application to natural objects. The reader will not fail to remember "The many-knotted water-flag ;" "The ragged rims of thunder, with shadow-streaks of rain ;" "The creeping mosses and clambering weeds ;" "A sand-built ridge of heaped hills ;" "Turrets lichen-gilded like a rock ;" "Full-foliaged elms ;" "Dewy-tasselled woods," and a hundred others, not less honest, apt, and veracious. Always in his verse Tennyson, with the unerring instinct of the artist, adopts the word which of all others is best fitted for its purpose. There is no straining after effect, no resort to ostentatious and pedantic phraseology in order to astonish and surprise the reader ; every word fits into its place in the rich and beautiful mosaic. I venture on one quotation :

And rise, O moon, from yonder down,
Till over down and over dale
All night the shining vapour sail
And pass the silent, lighted town,
The white-faced halls, the glancing rills,
And catch at every mountain head,
And o'er the friths that branch and spread
Their sleeping silver thro' the hills ;
And touch with shade the bridal doors,
With tender gloom the roof, the wall ;
And breaking let the splendour fall
To spangle all the happy shores.

There is more in this matter of epithets than at first sight one would suppose. We have attempted to show that they indicate and help to define the contrast between the older literature, with its generalisations, its commonplaces and ostentatious neglect of details, and the later literature, with its subtlety of analysis and its exactness of discrimination. We might also take up the position of the grammarian, and insist on the variety afforded by a judicious use of figures : by synecdoche, by metonymy, by prolepsis, by autonomasia, as in Gray's "Village Hampden" ; by personification, as in Coleridge's address to Mont Blanc, "Thou kingly spirit" ; or by metaphor, as in Tennyson's lines :

A crowd of hopes,
That sought to sow themselves like winged seeds.
The primary requirement in the epithet

is that it shall be appropriate. Thus we recognise the justness of Charles Kingsley's description of "the cruel, crawling foam, the cruel, hungry foam," when the tide, stealthily creeping over the sands of Dee, has found a victim in a "gold-haired maiden." But this suggestion of the devouring cruelty of the sea would be out of place when Shelley basks in its sunshine, and beholds "the smile of Heaven on the bosom of the deep;" and very different is the idea which Tennyson seeks to put before us when he paints an iron coast and angry waves, which "roar rock-thwarted under bellowing caves." Our last example of apt and happy epithet I borrow from Mrs. Barrett Browning's noble poem of "Aurora Leigh." It is perfect in its simplicity, "simplex munditiis":

The tangled hedgerows, where the cows push out
Impatient horns and tolerant churning mouths
Twixt dripping ash-boughs.

BINKS'S COURTSHIP.

A COMPLETE STORY.

CHAPTER I.

BINKS was forty.

At least he said he was, and as he had always been forty ever since I first had the pleasure of making his acquaintance some ten years back, I had no reason to disbelieve his statement.

It was on Binks's birthday that he gave me this piece of information for the tenth time, and he gave it with a sigh.

"Joseph," he said, "who would think that this is my fortieth birthday? Dear, dear, how the years do fly!"

It was my own private opinion that Binks had a knack of making them stand still, but I held my tongue. I never irritate a man when I see that he is about to confide in me, and something was evidently weighing on Binks's mind.

He was smoking a pipe with a depressed air as we sat over the fire together, and I wondered if his cook had given notice. Binks was particular over his food.

"Joseph," he continued, after a pause, "when a man has reached the age of forty, it begins to dawn upon him that he has duties to do in the world—duties, my boy."

It struck me that if a man did not realise this fact until he had reached the age mentioned by Binks, it was extremely probable that he would pass out of life without ever thinking of them at all.

"For instance," went on Binks, fixing his eye upon me, "there's marriage, now. A man ought to marry, Joseph."

I was thirty-five myself—not by Binks's way of calculating—and unmarried. I anticipated, therefore, a lecture from Binks on the subject.

"My dear fellow," I said, "I'm too ugly. Nobody would look at me."

I thought that my humble answer to Binks was a playful way of putting a stop to a conversation which might be distasteful, and which was certain to bore me. I was therefore surprised at the ferocity of Binks's small eyes as he turned them on me.

"You?" he said, in slow and measured tones of scorn. "You are only a boy. I was speaking of myself."

To say that my eyes nearly fell out of my head at this remark, would be a poor and feeble way of expressing my astonishment. Ever since Binks's first fortieth birthday—ten years ago—he had been such a confirmed bachelor and woman-hater, that the idea of matrimony had never even entered into my head in connection with him. He had lived in the same solid, square, old-fashioned house, partaken of the same solid, square, old-fashioned meals, and been served by the same solid, square, old-fashioned servants, as long as I could remember. He liked everything to be done by clockwork, and had certain strange fixed whims and ways of his own which a future Mrs. Binks would infallibly do her best to upset. In person, too, Binks could scarcely be called attractive. He presented the general appearance of an unfledged sparrow. He had a beaky nose, small, beady, black eyes, and a high, bald head, with a scanty fringe of suspicious-coloured hair all round it. When he got excited in conversation and flapped his arms about, the resemblance became positively startling, and it was all I could do to prevent myself from admiring the exact personification aloud sometimes.

On the present occasion, of which I duly recognised the importance, I felt that something was expected of me. I resolved to be diplomatic, however, as Binks looked so much in earnest—he is a bigger man than I am, and apt to hit out when irritated—and I therefore repressed those brilliant and pungent witticisms which were hovering at the end of my tongue, and for the readiness and aptitude of which I had achieved quite a reputation in a small way, and merely said, shaking my head a little:

"Well, well, Binks, there is something in what you say, but I am afraid it will be a great change for you."

"That is what I am rather afraid of too, Joseph," responded Binks a little uneasily, "but I am a firm man, as you know, and I should resist any innovations of which I disapproved."

I fancied that this antenuptial resolution on Binks's part might be productive of matrimonial squabbles in the future, especially if the lady happened to be high-spirited.

I imparted these impressions to Binks in a judiciously veiled manner.

"Not at all, not at all," he answered, rising and walking about the room excitedly. "I have no fears on that score. I shall be particularly careful, in making my choice, to fix upon a lady who is both amiable and pliable."

"They are rather difficult to meet with," I replied, by way of damping his ardour a little; "or at least Nature, in her beautiful way of balancing things, usually unites amiability with ugliness. Witness myself."

"Not at all, not at all," replied Binks once more—this was a favourite expression of his. "I assure you that a beautiful face is generally a reflection of the beautiful soul within, and vice versa."

I do not think that Binks meant to be personally insulting here, but he is not always so careful in the choice of expression as he should be. A coarser-minded man than myself would have looked upon the remark as a direct affront.

"My dear Binks," I said, "I can only hope that you will find your paragon. My own experience tells me that such a woman does not exist."

A slow, cunning smile crept over Binks's face as I said this, and the expression made me so uneasy that I exclaimed hastily:

"Good Heavens, Binks, is it possible that you have already made your choice?"

Binks flapped a little nearer, and the fatuous smile spread over his features.

"What if I have?" he said hoarsely.

I made no reply, being for the moment rather stunned, and also occupied in my own mind in running over all Binks's feminine acquaintances. I failed to find one whom I considered in any way suitable.

In the meantime Binks had flapped to the glass, and was regarding himself in it with an expression of innocent admiration of his own charms, which made me long to

fell him to the earth. How often have I wished that Heaven had not made me two feet shorter than Binks!

"You wouldn't call me a bad-looking man, now, eh, Joseph?" he said, with a smirk, as he turned away.

"Well, Binks, there's no accounting for tastes, you know."

This answer, in some inexplicable manner, seemed to have a soothing effect upon him.

"Quite right, Joseph, quite right; it is as you say. I have hopes that my advances will be met favourably. I look young," said Binks, inflating his chest and going round like a windmill, "and I feel young. Now, I am sure that no one would take me to be forty, Joseph. Come, now, would they?"

"No one," I hastened to assure him, with obvious irony. But again he seemed pleased.

"No one, as you say. I have a great opinion of your judgement, Joseph. It is sound on many points, and frequently coincides with mine. Joseph, young as you are, I am about to confide in you."

He stopped for a moment to draw a deep breath.

"It is a terrible step," he said meditatively, "and to tell you the truth, there are times when, charming as I know her to be, I rather shrink from the thought of having to spend my life at her side. But there, a man never knows what scrapes an over-punctilious sense of duty will drag him into. You see, I am the last of my family, Joseph."

He sank his voice to a mournful whisper as he said this, and I understood from it that the only motive he had for plunging into matrimony was in order to raise up a fresh generation of Binkses, wherewith to decorate this forlorn earth.

"Oh, yes, Binks," I replied, in hasty answer to his somewhat hurt glance, "I quite see how it is. Of course you ought to marry."

"Yes, yes, it will have to be done," said Binks, with a weary sigh; "people have gone through it before, I suppose. A man has duties, you know—"

I burst in to interrupt a string of little moral aphorisms which I foresaw were coming, and of which I know Binks to be particularly fond.

"Oh, stow that, Binks," I said, somewhat roughly. "What's her name?"

"You have a very coal-heaverish way of putting things," said Binks, in a tone of

marked displeasure, "and you are always in too great a hurry. That propensity of hurrying is fatal to a man in your profession, Joseph."

I looked round for my hat and stick in such a decided manner that Binks saw that I was not to be trifled with. The fatuous smile stole over his face again.

"You know Mrs. Huckwell?" he said, in a whisper.

I started back in amazement. I am not often moved to express myself in a vulgar manner, but I could not refrain from giving a low whistle of astonishment.

Mrs. Huckwell!

She was a tall, thin, over-dressed widow of more than forty years—Binks's forty years, too!—with a high, unnatural fixed colour in her cheeks, and an evident taste for millinery and jewellery. She "gushed" a good deal, and was the happy possessor of five very handsome unmarried daughters. Fancy Binks, the sober, stolid old bachelor Binks, stepfather to five lively, fashionable young ladies!

I lay back in my chair, and feebly passed my hand across my forehead. Binks flapped a little nearer, and I spoke hastily:

"I'm sure I congratulate you heartily, Binks—so sensible, and all that. Only I am afraid you will find five girls rather a handful to—"

I never finished that sentence. Binks came so near that I pushed my chair quickly back. There was a look in his beady eyes which I did not like. They glowed like coals of fire.

"Why, you confounded fool!" he exclaimed wrathfully, shaking an angry fist in my face. "Mrs. Huckwell, indeed! What should I want to marry an old hag like that for—with her painted cheeks and ridiculous bonnets? You never wait for me to finish a sentence, Joseph. This habit of undue precipitancy is growing on you, and will no doubt some day land you in an unpleasant position. No, Joseph, I am not quite old enough to think of Mrs. Huckwell, thank you. I have fixed upon Gertrude, and feel sure that she will do honour to my choice."

I gave a shrill, unnatural laugh as Binks thus brought out the name of the woman whom he had candidly confessed he rather shrank from as a lifelong companion. I know one man at least, small in stature though great in soul, who would have given all that he possessed for the chance of spending his life with Gertrude

Huckwell, and I have no doubt that there were many others who shared his feelings. Now, although all the Misses Huckwell were eminently handsome girls, Gertrude was the flower of the flock. She was also "the last of that bright band" in point of age, having just completed her nineteenth birthday.

I thought of her light, lithe figure, her charming face, her beautiful eyes, and her bright bronze hair—and then I looked at Binks, tall, and thin, and stooping, with crow's-feet round his eyes, and that fringe of odd-coloured hair adorning his polished head, and I groaned aloud.

"What are you making that noise for, Joseph?" said Binks sharply. "Are you afraid that the lady of my choice should prove less amiable than I think? I assure you, Joseph, that she has shown herself quite angelic under the most trying circumstances."

If the trying circumstances stood for Binks himself, I could understand that Gertrude Huckwell must be more angel than woman to endure them.

"Are you—have you proposed?" I demanded, in the hasty manner which Binks had so often openly deprecated. I asked this question with a sinking heart, for however angelic a woman may be, riches make a distinct impression on her sometimes if she has been brought up amid concealed poverty. Now Binks was a rich man, and Gertrude was poor.

"I cannot say I have exactly proposed," said Binks, inflating his chest once more, "but I have paid her marked attentions—very marked attentions. I think there can have been no mistake about the object of my visits, and she has received them with every appearance of pleasure. I ventured to make her a small present of a bracelet yesterday," added Binks, with a simper, "quite an inexpensive little thing"—what a mean beggar the fellow is!—diamonds would not be good enough for Gertrude—"and she let me clasp it on her pretty arm and seemed quite delighted."

Binks is such a disgusting mass of vanity, and pomposity, and egregious egotism that he makes me feel quite sick sometimes.

"Oh, then it is practically settled," I said, with an airy attempt at jocularly, "and you will be calling upon me to draw up the marriage settlement."

"M—yes," said Binks thoughtfully, rasping his chin with one lean hand. "M—yes, I dare say there will be settlements. I shall propose to Gertrude in due

form to-morrow," he added, drawing himself up with an air of dignity, "and I am happy to say that I feel quite sure of receiving a favourable reply. She has given me every encouragement in her pretty, modest way."

I could have seized Binks round his wiry neck and flung him out of his own window with the greatest pleasure. Only the fear of a passing policeman restrained me from putting my desire into execution.

"I shall speak to Mrs. Huckwell first, of course," went on Binks, who was too absorbed in his own affairs to notice the expression of my face. "In my young days it was not considered etiquette to propose until one had gained the consent of the young lady's parents. I shall do everything in proper form, you may be sure."

"I don't think you will experience the least difficulty in gaining Mrs. Huckwell's consent to your wooing," I remarked drily.

"No, I apprehend not," said Binks, craning his neck to get another look at himself in the glass. "I apprehend not. Mrs. Huckwell is a sensible woman, and knows that I am a man of some position."

"And means," I added—maliciously, as I thought.

"And means," acquiesced Binks placidly. "I flatter myself that Gertrude Huckwell could do worse than take me for a husband."

I took my hat and stick and went after that. It is quite true that there is no fool like an old fool. How beautifully and unconsciously Binks illustrates that adage!

CHAPTER II.

I WATCHED Binks walking up the street next day with great interest. I saw that he was bound for the Huckwells' house not only by the manner in which he was dressed, but also by the way he was walking. He pranced delicately along the road on the tips of his patent-leather toes like Agag the king of renowned memory, and poked his head rather far forward, after the fashion of an enquiring camel.

He wore a tight frock-coat, severely buttoned in at the waist in order to give elegance to his figure, lemon-coloured kid gloves, a high shiny hat, and a huge button-hole of moss-rose buds. These latter, which in fact formed quite a nose-gay, he had every intention of dramatically presenting to his lady-love as soon as

he was accepted, having a dim idea that he had read somewhere or other that the flower in question meant "I love thee to despair."

My eyes could only follow Binks as far as the end of the street, where he turned a corner in a tremulous fashion and disappeared, so that for the following part of this narrative I am indebted to Binks himself on his return from his visit. For the sake of my readers I will transcribe what had occurred as though I had been an eye-witness. Indeed, Binks's vivid description almost brought the scene before my mind.

After he turned the corner, where my eyes last beheld him, he walked steadily onwards in the direction of Shaw Lodge, the Huckwells' abode. He noticed with pleasure how nicely the house was kept, and how gay the window-boxes looked, full of the deep blue of the lobelia against a background of flaring scarlet geranium. He wondered if Gertrude's fair fingers were responsible for the charming effect; and with all the inconsistency of a man in love, concluded that they were.

He rang the bell loudly, probably owing to extreme nervousness, and waited for admittance. The sound of Gertrude's voice singing in the drawing-room floated to his ears, and he smiled faintly. It would be sweet to have this voice always ready to warble to him. He had closed his eyes as he dreamed this fair dream, and when he opened them again he found the door ajar, and the servant waiting for him in some astonishment to ask the usual formula. Somewhat flurried, he stepped in, saying:

"Is Mrs. Huckwell at home?"

And the answer being in the affirmative, added, as he took off his hat:

"I should like to see her alone—er, on business."

The servant, who knew him well, after taking stock of the tall hat, moss-rose buds, and yellow kid gloves, decided that she could guess what that business was, and retired with a smile on her rosy face.

Binks walked up and down the room in a perfect frenzy of impatience. In the face of danger—as he observed to me afterwards—he could be bold enough, but when he had to deal with a woman he became nervous and flustered. From which it will be seen that Binks did not show to the best advantage that afternoon, and that he was not in possession of that

evenly balanced mind upon which he prides himself. Mrs. Huckwell, contrary to her usual custom, kept him waiting some time, and the agonised suitor was really in a pitiable condition when she at last made her appearance.

He had heard a good deal of hurried tramping about overhead, and concluded, rationally enough, that Mrs. Huckwell was improving her toilet for the sake of the business interview on which Mr. Binks had come.

This view of affairs was confirmed by her entrance in a magnificently flowing tea-gown, which had evidently been hastily donned, from the fact that she had hooked it wrong from top to bottom, a mistake which Binks's eyes took in in a dull and deadened sort of way. In telling me the story afterwards he could describe every detail of her costume—down to the shell necklace round her throat, and the rings on her fingers. To him she had never seemed so vulgar and over-dressed. The fixed colour in her cheeks, the superabundance of jewellery, the clinking, impossible *châtelaine* that she wore at her waist—all combined to irritate him to an almost unbearable degree. He told me afterwards that the thought of having her for a mother-in-law almost made him give up the idea of taking Gertrude for a wife. It seems curious that this thought should have flashed across him just then, but it did.

"Dear Mr. Binks," said the lady, seating herself beside him on the sofa when the first greetings had been interchanged, and her bejewelled fingers had pressed, for a moment, Binks's tight kid glove, "how delightful of you to come and see us at this hour, before any horrid visitors are likely to interrupt us! So very friendly!"

Binks grasped his stick rather tightly, and gazed down into the depths of his hat. Being on an unconventional footing with the family he usually left these articles in the hall, but this afternoon he felt that he must have support of some kind, and the stick seemed to help him somehow. It was at this juncture that he began to breathe rather hard in little snorts and gasps, as was his wont when excited, and Mrs. Huckwell hoped anxiously that he "had not hurried himself."

"Not at all—not at all," said Binks, recovering himself a little. "Er—what charming window-boxes you have, Mrs. Huckwell!"

Mrs. Huckwell glanced out at the lobelia

and geranium with rather a disappointed air, and replied that they were certainly effective, but that they were a great deal of trouble.

"I shouldn't be surprised, now," said Binks, with a cumbrous attempt at jocularity, "if some of my fair young friends took the trouble off your hands—Miss Gertrude, for instance?"

"My darling Gertrude is devoted to flowers," answered Mrs. Huckwell, "but she does not love them as passionately as her mother. To these poor fingers, Mr. Binks," and she playfully wagged them before his face, "is due the honour of any amateur gardening done in this house."

"Oh!" said Binks, rather blankly.

He had hoped that the question, cunningly devised, might lead smoothly on to the proposal he intended making, but he had travelled up a blind alley, so to speak, and he therefore hastily abandoned the subject. He cleared his throat and took a plunge.

"I dare say you are surprised to see me here this afternoon, Mrs. Huckwell," he said; "it is an unusual hour for me to call."

"Indeed, we are only too pleased to see you at any time, Mr. Binks. I am sure we all look forward to your visits with the greatest of pleasure. We should feel quite lost without you. Gertrude was saying so to me only the other day. 'Mamma,' she said, 'whatever should we do without Mr. Binks?' Dear child, she is quite fond of you, and no wonder, I am sure, when you are so good to her."

Binks beamed and bridled with pride.

"Oh, no, not good at all; a great pleasure, I am sure—greatest admiration for Miss Gertrude," he murmured, rather fragmentarily.

"But it is good of you," insisted the lady; "that bracelet, for instance. Gerty was so delighted. 'That dear Mr. Binks,' she said to me when you had gone, 'is he not kind, mamma? Quite the kindest friend we have.' You see what a favourite you are, Mr. Binks."

Binks was in quite a twifter of pleasure at this. The road stretched so smoothly in front of him that there did not seem to be a single obstacle. The demand for Gertrude's hand was a pure formality, but as such it must be gone through.

Binks clutched the stick more tightly, and began:

"My visits to this house form the

pleasantest part of my life, Mrs. Huckwell."

"Indeed, I'm sure I'm only too glad," murmured Mrs. Huckwell. "It is very kind of you to say so."

"You must have seen for some time," went on Binks, "that I have a motive in coming here—a motive, ma'am."

"Indeed, I have thought so sometimes, but of course it was not for me to speak," said Mrs. Huckwell, showing a suspiciously even row of teeth. "I think several people have noticed it," she added, with a simper.

"I—ah—yes, perhaps so," said Binks, rather pleased at this remark. "I conclude, then, that I may take your consent for granted?"

"Indeed—really—yes, I suppose so. This is a very happy day for me. Timothy," she went on, much to Binks's surprise, coming very near him. "You poor dear fellow, I believe you have been trying to propose for years! Of course, though I gave you every encouragement, I was powerless in the matter. My poor father used to say that men were fools in such affairs, and that a woman had to do half the work if she ever wanted to get a husband at all."

Now there were several things in this speech that jarred upon Binks, who is, as he often tells me, a man of peculiarly refined susceptibilities. In the first place he disliked being called Timothy, and in the second place he thought Mrs. Huckwell's manner bordered on familiarity. He drew a little away from her as he replied:

"Oh, well, as for years, of course that is not the case. I have been deeply attached for some months, I own."

"As if everybody had not seen it!" said Mrs. Huckwell playfully, stealing a bony hand into his. "Why, my poor dear Timothy, don't you suppose I know the signs well enough? Since my William's death, I can assure you I have had hard work to keep a widow."

She sighed deeply, and Binks took advantage of her temporary pensiveness to try and wriggle his hand away from hers, but she held it fast.

"I am sure," she said, with a blush, "that it doesn't seem quite fair on the girls, but when one is in love, one scatters every consideration to the winds, doesn't one, Timothy?"

This speech, and the squeeze she gave his hand, a little puzzled Binks, who was

already hopelessly confused, and he supposed that she alluded to the fact that it was hard on the elder girls to assist at their youngest sister's wedding, in the character of spinsters. He therefore made a guttural sound of assent.

"Not but what they are quite prepared for it, Timothy—quite prepared. Girls are so sharp about these things. I must tell you what Gertrude said when she saw you coming in at the door—I am sure you will not mind, you are so good-natured. She rushed up to me at once. 'Mamma,' she said, 'there is Mr. Binks standing on the door-steps, and he has light kid gloves on, and such a bunch of roses in his button-hole! I am sure he has come to propose.' You mustn't be angry, Timothy," added Mrs. Huckwell, rather anxiously, as she observed a cloud hovering over Binks's polished forehead. "Girls are a little giddy, you know, and will have a laugh at us elderly folks; but no one appreciates the goodness of your heart better than Gertrude."

"I hope your daughter is not inclined to be flippant, ma'am," said Binks, frowning, and unappeased by the appealing pressure of her fingers.

"Oh dear, no! I should not allow such a thing for a moment! And you have no idea how the—the result of this afternoon will please her. Of course it is not unexpected, but still— She is so quick! When you gave her that bracelet last week—so generous of you, dear Timothy—she came to me afterwards, and put her cheek against mine, and said, 'I think it is my future papa who has given me this, isn't it, mamma?' Wasn't it sharp of the dear child? Fancy you Gertrude's papa!"

Binks told me that he heard these terrible words as in a dream. It must have been quite five minutes before he grasped the full horror of the situation. He "Gertrude's papa!"

He said he had not the least idea how he got out of the house. He remembered rising in a dazed sort of way. He remembered the tea-gowned figure with its clinking *châtelaine* rustling anxiously after him, and asking if he "felt faint," and his reply, wild with despair, "I must get away, I want air. Don't follow me."

The next thing he remembered was that he reached his own house in such a tottering condition that the butler thought he was drunk, and offered to help him upstairs. He reached his own room somehow, set his heel on the rose-buds, and

deliriously threw the yellow kid gloves out of the window. Then he sat down to collect himself.

Here endeth the story as told to me by Binks.

CHAPTER III.

AN hour later, having watched Binks's reeling progress home, I called to enquire for him, and was not surprised when the butler, while readily admitting such an honoured friend as myself, confided to me that he feared his master was in no fit condition to receive visitors. He lowered his voice as he said that he had lived with Mr. Binks, man and boy, for thirty year, and had never seen him the worse for drink before.

I hardly knew whether to save Binks's reputation from the stigma of drunkenness by revealing that his affections had just been shattered, as a legitimate excuse for his condition, or not. But it occurred to me that I should be violating his confidence by laying bare the romance of his bosom to the vulgar eye of a common menial; and besides, how did I know for certain that Binks had been refused? Might not his tremulousness proceed from excess of joy? I only shook my head, therefore, and proceeded upstairs to Binks's bedroom, whither he had tottered unaided. I expected to find him either flapping about the room in a state of indignant excitement, or else sunk into a state of hopeless collapse. But to my surprise he neither flapped nor wailed. He was energetically engaged in ramming things into portmanteaux with an air of sullen determination.

"Why, Binks," I said, pausing on the threshold of his chamber, "what the deuce are you doing?"

"I am packing. Can't you see that for yourself, you idiot?" responded Binks sulkily.

He went on with his work, and I sat on the edge of the bed and watched him.

"Where are you going?" I asked at last.

"To the uttermost parts of the earth," responded Binks, scripturally if rather vaguely. "I am going abroad for years. Perhaps I may never come home again."

I had not given Binks credit for loving so deeply and passionately. I was sorry for having misjudged him. I reflected that often, under a commonplace exterior one finds a warm and romantic heart. He had been refused—and he suffered.

"Binks," I said persuasively, "tell me all about it."

He sat down on a loaded portmanteau and told me, with full details, the whole harrowing history.

Binks had not always treated me with the deference due to my five-and-thirty years and my superior mental endowments. Nevertheless, when I saw his pitiable condition I felt my heart moved within me.

"Binks," I said abruptly, "you are an awful fool, as I have often told you before. It is your fatal habit of hurrying that has landed you in this unpleasant position. But I am sorry for you. If you choose to leave yourself entirely in my hands, I will see what I can do for you."

I assumed a judicial attitude as I said this, and Binks looked crushed and humble.

"Now you clearly understand, Binks, that when I say that, I mean that I will help you to dissolve your engagement"—Binks groaned here—"to Mrs. Huckwell. But I do not intend to assist you in any further matrimonial adventures. You must give up all idea of marrying Gertrude."

"I don't want to marry any one," said Binks fervently.

I paced up and down the room for a few steps, frowning portentously.

"You will give me 'carte blanche' in the matter, I presume?" I went on. "I don't want any of your clumsy interference in my schemes."

"I am sure I couldn't be in better hands, Joseph," said Binks, with flabby humility.

"It's just as well that you at last recognise that, Binks," I said severely; "some men might have taken the past into account, and left you to get yourself out of the scrape as best you could. However—Binks, did you have any money in the Oriental Bank?"

The suddenness of this question nearly threw Binks off his mental and physical balance.

"Why, yes," he responded; "but what has that got to do with it? It has gone smash, and I have lost sixty pounds."

I smiled grimly as I seated myself at Binks's writing-desk, and wrote a short letter which I sealed and put in my breast-pocket.

It was addressed to the editor of the local paper.

"Well, good-bye, Binks," I said cheerfully, "and thank the stars that you possess a friend who has a head on his

shoulders, and a generous and forgiving disposition."

Binks wanted to hear a great deal more about what I intended to do, but I departed with a sphinx-like air, and left him, though still sitting on the edge of a portmanteau, with a gleam of hope in his beady eyes which had not been there when I first entered the room.

I dropped the letter into the nearest pillar-box, and went home serenely, chuckling a little to myself.

The next morning this paragraph appeared in the "North Barton Courier":

"We regret to learn that our esteemed and respected townsman, Mr. Timothy Binks, of Oldfield House, has been a very heavy loser by the failure of the Oriental Bank. Rumour says that the unfortunate gentleman had deposited nearly the whole of his fortune in it a few days before the crash came. It is to be feared that he is not the only loser here."

I read this account of my friend's ruin with a cheerful and unmoved countenance, and in the afternoon I took my hat and stick and went over to Shaw Lodge in time for a cup of afternoon tea. I saw from the moment I entered the drawing-room that the family seemed in a depressed frame of mind. Casting my eyes furtively round, I saw the "North Barton Courier" lying open on the table.

After the first greetings had been interchanged, and Gertrude had supplied me with tea and muffins with her own fair hands, Mrs. Huckwell took up the paper, and mournfully asked me, as Mr. Binks's oldest friend and adviser, whether there were any truth in the sad statement she had just read.

"For," she remarked, "these newspapers do get hold of things and exaggerate them in a most extraordinary fashion, and I should not like to write and condole with poor dear Mr. Binks if he has only lost a few pounds."

"Mrs. Huckwell," I said solemnly, putting down my cup, and neglecting the muffins, "our poor friend Binks is in a state bordering on distraction. I have just come from him. A sadder sight I never saw. He was already packing to go abroad, but he desisted on my advice from deciding anything hastily, and will, I hope, be induced to stop on in the old familiar place where we all love and respect him. I dare say," I added, with a sigh, "that some of us might club together and provide a small cottage to shelter his old age."

"Dear me, is it as bad as that?" said Mrs. Huckwell uneasily. "I should have thought Mr. Binks would have done better abroad."

"You don't understand Timothy Binks if you say that, ma'am. He is of a peculiarly sensitive disposition. Transplant him and he would die! Besides, to tell you the truth," and I bent a little forward and fixed my eyes on hers, "he seems to have a particular reason for wishing to stay in North Barton. I fancy it is a sentimental one, but I cannot violate the poor fellow's confidence by telling you any more."

"Then you don't know the lady's name?" asked Mrs. Huckwell, with an uneasy laugh.

"I haven't the least idea," I answered unblushingly. "Binks is a very reserved man. But I feel sure that if he loves it will be for ever. I hope the lady to whom he is attached will not throw the worthy fellow overboard. He is a man in a thousand."

"Ah, you are young, and can take a romantic view of things," said Mrs. Huckwell, sighing. "We old folks know that a household is not carried on by kisses. If I knew the lady of whom you speak, Mr. Slater, I should recommend her to break off the match at once."

She sipped her tea with a pensive air and relapsed into silence, now and then casting a look at the paper and murmuring:

"Poor Mr. Binks!"

When I left, Gertrude followed me to the door. There were actually tears in the poor girl's beautiful eyes, and I felt a perfect brute.

"Please give my love to Mr. Binks," she said, in a whisper, "and tell him how very, very sorry I am. He is always so good to me."

I gave Binks part of the message, but the "love" I kept myself. I thought it might have an intoxicating effect upon him, and lead him to seek Gertrude out on the spot, reveal the fraud—of which at present he was blissfully unaware—and offer to make her his wife at once, with or without the formality of Mrs. Huckwell's assent.

I strolled into Oldfield House that night to see how affairs were progressing with Binks. I found him sitting with his elbows on the table and his head in his hands, reading a much-perfumed missive with an air of the most complete amazement. He had run his fingers through the fringe of

hair that adorned his head, until it stood up like the aureole of some martyred saint. Only it revealed the fact that while the top layer of the aureole was almost black, the underneath part was nearly white. But Binks lost sight of personal appearance for the time being.

"Will you tell me what this means?" he cried in excitement the moment he saw me, flapping the note wildly to and fro. "This is some of your doing, I suppose."

I sat down in a leisurely manner, and stretched out my hand for the scented paper.

"My dear Binks," I said, "don't get excited. That fatal habit of hurrying is growing upon you."

Too crushed to retaliate, Binks relapsed into silence while I read the note aloud.

It ran thus :

"SHAW LODGE, July 10th.

"MY DEAR MR. BINKS,—In view of the sad news that I read in to-day's 'Courier,' I am sure you will agree with me that it is best to terminate our short-lived engagement at once. This decision may seem harsh, and I know how deeply you will feel it—my heart aches for you as I write the cruel, cruel words—but I am sure that perfect frankness and openness between us will save many bitter pangs in the future. Some day you will thank me for having been strong enough to take the course that my head, and not my heart, dictates. My late dear husband, in his jealous love for me, enacted that in case of a re-marriage I should lose my present little income. I cannot drag my poor children down to poverty, even for your sake. Do not ask it, dear Timothy, I am firm on the point. If I might give you a piece of advice, it would be that you should leave the place for a while. Much pain would be spared to us both by this.

"I do not presume to offer you my sympathy, but can only remain,

"Your sorrowing friend,

"ANASTASIA C. M. HUCKWELL."

"Well, Binks," I said tranquilly as I laid the note down, "you ought to be very much obliged to me."

"I am not so sure about that," growled Binks. (He really is the most ungrateful brute alive.) "You have made me look a perfect fool."

I showed him the paragraph in the paper. He was furious at first, as he is unfortunately a scrupulously truthful man, but he calmed down after a while, and

even thanked me in a grudging way before I left.

I do not know what Mrs. Huckwell's feelings must have been when she saw Binks daily driving about in his well-appointed dog-cart as usual. I fancy she must have felt her over-precipitancy very deeply, for she left the place soon after the affair, and Shaw Lodge and its window-boxes knew her no more.

I have had a little money left me lately, and I have married Gertrude myself. I showed Binks that I bore him no malice for his former affection to my wife by asking him to be best man at my wedding. But he took the compliment in very ill part, and though he sent Gertrude an exceedingly handsome present, he could never be brought to forgive what he is pleased to term my "treachery." And just look at the scrape I got him out of!

He still lives at Oldfield House, and I am told looks as youthful as ever. He drives about as usual, and pays marked attentions to pretty young ladies who are kind enough to allow him a sort of grandfatherly familiarity.

But I think his courting days are over!

"OUTLAWED."

A SHORT SERIAL.

CHAPTER I.

"AND so I am not to have the pleasure of a dance, Miss Brown?" said the young guardsman, in his most drawling voice, glancing as he spoke into the great mirror before which he was standing, and caressingly stroking his handsome moustache.

The girl, seated on the divan beneath the great mirror, looked up at him with secret but unmitigated scorn.

"No; I haven't any left."

He looked languidly incredulous. The girl flushed angrily. She could have filled her programme exactly three times over. But it certainly was not necessary to state so patent a fact to the impertinent fop before her.

"You see, I saw your programme when I picked it up a moment ago," he said, as if struck by a bright thought.

"I wished to keep some dances."

"And you have not one for me?" with another languidly approving look into the mirror.

"Certainly not," thinking how con-

temptible it was to see a man admiring himself in a glass.

"Well, I'm sorry," hastily. "But I thought I would ask you."

"And I've refused you," with cutting emphasis.

The young man lounged languidly away, leaving Miss Hope Brown fairly scarlet with indignation.

She hated Mr. Gilbert Egerton with all her soul. He had called her a pert little schoolgirl, and had sneered at her father for being an oil and colourman. His comment on herself did not trouble her much, but that on her father was intolerable. It was not an aristocratic trade, but her father was an honest, hard-working man, and his life was infinitely nobler than that of Mr. Gilbert Egerton's, for all the blue blood that ran in his veins.

Mrs. Egerton, of Meadowlands, was giving a ball that night. The Egertons were the first people in the county, and their entertainments were celebrated far and wide. This one was of more than usual magnificence, for it was given in honour of their second son Gilbert's return from the Egyptian campaign.

Not that, as Miss Hope Brown contemptuously remarked to herself, as she looked round at the lights, and flowers, and crowd of guests, his services there required so much celebration, for he had been wounded almost at the beginning of the campaign, and had never been allowed to go to the front at all. Still, though he had returned undecorated, and without even having gained his company, his parents were equally pleased to see him, and had made a great deal of him during the leave he was spending at home with them. Other people made a great fuss over him too, just as if he were not conceited enough already, thought Miss Hope Brown. She was staying with his mother at the same time. She was quite sick of it all, and had persistently snubbed him ever since the day of his arrival, nearly a month ago now; but nothing could disturb his ineffable self-respect. In her secret heart she believed him to be a malingerer. But the band was playing another waltz in the ball-room, and Miss Hope Brown, going off with her next partner, recovered a little from her anger and vexation.

For a brief interval the two large drawing-rooms, thrown up to the guests, were empty, as all the dancers gathered in the ball-room.

The distant strains of the melancholy-sweet waltz music, and the soft splash of waters in the conservatories opening off the greater drawing-room, were the only sounds that broke the silence. The air was fragrant with flowers and the perfume of women's dresses. A girl had dropped her fan, and it lay on the Oriental rug at the foot of the divan below the mirror. The drawing-rooms looked on to the stone terrace, from which, here and there, short flights of steps led down into the grounds. All the doors and windows stood wide open to the fragrant coolness of the summer night. The rooms stood deserted. Then a tall figure stepped noiselessly from the terrace outside into the room, pausing for a second, under the Venetian lamp overhead, to listen and look lest any of the dancers still lingered.

The light fell full on the man's face, and, in the bright coloured rays, it showed pale and worn. He was a tall, slenderly built man of about twenty-eight. He was dressed in rough and ragged artisan's clothes, which had a most incongruous effect on the rest of his appearance.

His face, though worn and drawn, was exceedingly handsome in feature, while nothing could disguise the aristocratic distinction of his figure and appearance. His hands were white, too, slender of shape, and bore no marks of the toil his dress suggested. A curious expression, very bitter and very melancholy, came into his face as he stared round on the luxurious magnificence about him.

"It seems a long time ago," he said to himself. "And it will be longer yet before I can get back to this. I wonder how I shall endure it!" But the passion died out as quickly as it had kindled, and he laughed cynically. "It's rather early yet, speculating on my powers of endurance. It will be a bad look-out for me if they are going to fail yet!"

His eyes fell on the low divan where Miss Brown had been sitting. He had been outside on the terrace, hiding in the shadows cast by a great flowering shrub, while the little scene between her and Gilbert Egerton had been enacted. He had seen and heard it all.

"Stuck-up young jackanapes!" he muttered savagely. "That lovely little girl took him down!"

He caught sight of the fan lying where she had dropped it.

With another cautious look about him, he stepped swiftly to it, and raising it,

stood thoughtfully opening and shutting it.

It was a very costly one. The sticks of ivory inlaid with gold. It was faintly perfumed with the scent of the owner.

"I daresay she won't miss it," he said, after a second's reflection, "and it will be a nice little keepsake. She was exceedingly pretty. I wonder who she is?"

He kissed the fan lightly, smiling a little as he did so.

The distant music was dying away.

In a few more moments the rooms would be thronged once more with the dancers.

He took one last long look about him, then drew back to the doorway and vanished, a darker shadow, into the shadows of the summer night.

The ball went on. Everybody said it was one of the most enjoyable that the Egertons had ever given. Miss Hope Brown had never been to such a splendid entertainment before. She had only left school a few months ago, and this visit of hers to Meadowlands was her first entrance into society. She had been here now for more than a month, for Mrs. Egerton would not part with her, and her father, delighted that she, his only child, and the apple of his eye, should have this chance of entering into a set far above any he could ever have hoped to draw about her himself had wished her to stay.

She was exceedingly pretty. Her manners were the most winning in the world, in spite of the oil and colourman father. She was well educated. She dressed charmingly, for her taste was good, and her father, who had made his fortune, stinted her in nothing; and her social success, launched as she had been by Mrs. Egerton, of Meadowlands, on to the sea of society, had been most flattering. Those who knew of the oil and colourman father kindly overlooked the fact. To-night she was acknowledged one of the beauties of the evening, and no one troubled, under the present circumstances, to question why Mrs. Egerton, so rigidly exclusive as a rule, should have shown so much honour to the daughter of a man who had made his money in trade.

It had all been so delightful that, until to-night, she had enjoyed herself thoroughly.

To-night, just when her success was complete, and her cup of enjoyment full, she was conscious of a sense of blankness.

That speech of Gilbert Egerton's, spitefully repeated to her by a man whom she

had snubbed, instinctively disliking him—one of those malicious, mean-spirited snobs to be met in the "best sets" as well as in the lowest—ranked in her heart.

She loved her father dearly, and the suspicion that all these denizens of the great world who petted her would probably sneer at her father as Gilbert Egerton had done, wounded her to the quick. As the evening wore on the feeling deepened. She was full of a hot resentment against the pettiness and vulgarity of society.

The fact was, she was over-strung and over-excited. The sudden change from the peaceful monotony of her schooldays to this whirl of fashionable life had been too much for her. Her nerves had not yet steadied themselves under the pressure of this ceaseless round of pleasure and amusement.

It was while supper was being served, in the great banqueting hall, that, evading her partners, she slipped away into the grounds. The clocks were striking twelve as she left the house, driven by a great longing for the coolness and stillness of the summer night, and a passionate wish to cut herself adrift from the brilliant crowd in which she and her father could find no true sympathy. For she ranged herself on his side against all the world of rank and fashion. In her over-excitement she became morbid, and, under those conditions, naturally unjust. There were, even among that pleasure-pursuing throng, in spite of titles and blue blood, and the anomalies of inherited absurdities and prejudices, some who were perfectly capable of appreciating Mr. Brown at his real value.

She walked on, down the moonlit pathways, avoiding that part of the grounds where the dancers might come.

She turned out of the flower garden proper into the "wilderness," a portion of the grounds where the trees and shrubs had been allowed to grow more thickly, casting, to-night, great shadows in the moonlight.

There was an old summer-house there. It stood in a hollow, just where the garden again merged into the chase.

It was almost shut in by the overgrown trees and shrubs.

The position was lovely, and, to add to its picturesque wildness, a great mass of granite boulders lay scattered or heaped up, forming a background to the house itself. These were now almost entirely

covered by a tangle of ivy and creepers, or by the brambles and shrubs which had grown up between them. Some of the spaces which had been originally left open for a passage between the rocks were now an impenetrable mass of briar and bush.

The summer-house was very old. There had apparently always been one there, renewed, or rebuilt, as time and weather destroyed it. The present one had been allowed to fall into complete disrepair. Mrs. Egerton was almost the only member of the household who ever came that way.

It looked desolate enough in the moonlight as Hope stepped from the path between the trees into the open space before it.

For the first time she felt nervous. She regretted having come so far at that time of the night.

The hooting of an owl from the branch of an overhanging tree made her start, every nerve leaping with an eerie dismay.

Something stirred like a ripple through the still fringes of bracken that grew at the foot of the rocks, suggesting a weird fancy of some lurking, living thing watching her from its place of hiding, and she half turned to fly from a spot so isolated that any evil might come on her without her cries for help being heard.

The next moment, ashamed of her cowardice, she crossed the opening to the summer-house. Even in the picturesque and softening effects of the moonlight its dilapidations were plainly visible. It was built partly of stone. The walls were almost entirely hidden by creepers and mosses. But the woodwork was rotting. Mildew and the fret of weather had worked their will on everything. The door on its broken hinges was fastened up with a rusty chain. The coloured panes of the windows were so thick with dust and cobwebs that it was impossible to see through them into the interior of the building. They gave back no cheerful reflection of the moonlight showing on them as that lonely, eerie feeling touched the girl again. She felt that they might be the dead eyes of a dead house. She wondered why Mrs. Egerton seemed to be so fond of the place.

Then with a stifled cry she turned hurriedly, white and trembling, towards the great clump of shrubs that shut in the summer-house on the right. A sound like the groan of some hurt creature in

sharpest pain had suddenly broken on the lonely stillness of the night about her.

It was followed by a rustling and snapping of twigs, as something or some one forced a way through the undergrowth.

There was another groan this time, accompanied by an exclamation, certainly not fit for a lady's ears, which sent the blood tingling back into her face again.

The wounded creature was decidedly human, and not choice in his language.

The thought of poachers and other night desperadoes flashed through her mind with the keen consciousness of a very valuable pearl necklace she was wearing round her throat. The poachers had been particularly daring and active lately, while one of them had so black a record—

The bushes were thrust aside, and a man staggered out into the open a yard or two from her side.

His face, ghastly white, was stained with blood. One arm hung heavily at his side; the blood, trickling down it, had soaked the sleeve of the artisan's jacket he wore.

For a second they stood staring at each other in the moonlight, he with a stupid, dazed look in his eyes, as if he mistook the white-clad, slender figure, with its bare throat and arms, standing there in the moonshine, for some mystic creature from another sphere.

CHAPTER II.

THE poachers had been giving Mr. Egerton's gamekeepers an anxious time. On the evening of the ball, Eason, the head gamekeeper, had received a mysterious hint to the effect that one Ned Molloy, whose daring and unscrupulous defiance of the game laws had hitherto met with notorious success, would that night be taking a look at the Squire's pheasants.

If there was one man on the face of the earth Eason would have like to have seen shut up between four walls of a prison, Ned Molloy was that man. It was currently believed among his fellow gamekeepers that to assist successfully at his capture—either alive or dead—Eason would cheerfully have done his time between four prison walls himself. But Molloy took care that Eason should not run the risk of being tried for manslaughter, and so far had carefully managed to escape being caught red-handed.

The hint might only have been a blind ; but as it was given by a woman who felt that she had the right to complain of Molloy's conduct towards herself personally, Eason was inclined to make use of it.

"If there is one time when you can be sure human nature is speakin' the truth, it is when its heart is a-bubblin' over with jealousy," he said to one of the under-gamekeepers, who ventured to question the value of the hint.

It was about twelve o'clock. The ball was in full swing up at the house, while Mr. Egerton's gamekeepers were faithfully patrolling his preserves. Eason's round brought him, a few minutes after midnight, across that of his youngest gamekeeper. The point at which they had agreed to meet was on the outer edge of the chase, which skirted the grounds of the house on two sides.

"Seen anything, Ford?" asked Eason in a whisper, as they stepped cautiously towards each other, under cover of the trees.

"No, I don't believe we shall either!" said the other, in a slightly sulky tone. "It's all a plant to get us on a wrong——"

Eason grasped his arm with a grip of steel.

They stood in deep shadow, at the entrance of a narrow glade.

The moon's rays, piercing here and there the thick overhanging foliage, lighted up distinctly the farther end of the glade, where it merged into the chase.

It touched the figure of a man, who seemed to be trying to keep in the shadow as he stepped for a second out of the chase into the open, then vanished back again into the shelter of the underbush.

It almost seemed as if he too had caught sight of the gamekeepers.

"Come," whispered Eason, in a whisper of suppressed exultation. "That's one of the villains, anyway."

He sprang forward, followed by his companion.

At the same instant, the lurking figure flashed for a moment into the moonlight, as it darted across the head of the glade towards a narrow pathway at the other side. As the light struck it, Eason recognised the tall, lithe figure of the arch-

poacher Molloy, the fleetest-footed vagabond in the county. If he succeeded in reaching that narrow pathway, his escape was next to certain. But he limped slightly as he ran. Eason's quick eyes detected the faltering of the light step.

"Curse you, you shan't escape me this time, Ned Molloy!" cried Eason as he ran. "You'd better give in!" A note in the menacing voice made the fugitive wheel swiftly round, and the moonlight gleamed on something bright in his hand. It flashed up, covering Eason as he pressed on.

"It isn't Molloy!" said Ford, just behind. "Good Heavens!" in the same breath.

The next second there were three short, sharp cracks, almost simultaneous. Then the smoking gun dropped from Eason's hand, and staggering, he fell.

The poacher, apparently sure of his shot, had turned almost as he fired. When Ford, after that first involuntary rush to his companion, looked again, he had vanished.

"Curse him, whoever he was!" he said between his set teeth, as he tenderly lifted the wounded man.

"I'm all right," Eason opened his eyes. "Follow Molloy," he gasped. "The others will be coming when they hear. Curse it all!" with a burst of savage anger and disappointment. "If you don't, I'll——" He made a movement to rise, only to sink back with a groan.

Ford saw that it was best to obey. The sound of the firing was already hurrying up the others.

He ran on into the wood. But there was no sign of the poacher.

The other men came up, to find Eason senseless.

Ford, returning, told them what had happened, and as soon as Eason had been conveyed to his cottage, which luckily was not far off, and the doctor fetched, they all joined in the search.

But in spite of a most thorough investigation of the whole grounds, they were reluctantly compelled to acknowledge that once more Ned Molloy had escaped them.

The doctor thought so badly of Eason's wound that a message was sent up to the house to Mr. Gilbert Egerton.

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